



The Vegan Society
34-35 Ludgate Hill
Birmingham
B3 1EH

Rt. Hon Damian Hinds MP (Secretary of State for Education)
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

18th July 2019

Dear Mr Hinds,

We are writing regarding the School Food Standards, which we understand are regularly reviewed, with some suggested changes to make them more inclusive for the ever-growing number of vegan children.

The Vegan Society is an international charity based in the UK and part of our work is around protecting the rights of vegans, including vegan schoolchildren.

As you may be aware, vegans hold sincere ethical convictions, and seek to exclude, as far as is possible and practicable, all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose. The sincere convictions of vegans come within the protection of the law, and on the face of it, it appears that the School Food Standards could inadvertently be discriminatory. Vegans in the UK are protected under human rights and equality law. As such, the public sector (including schools) is obliged to take all necessary steps to accommodate the needs of vegans to prevent direct or indirect discrimination.

The School Food Standards currently include a mandatory daily milk requirement, obligating schools to provide milk from an animal to schoolchildren every day. Within this mandatory section there is no obligation for schools to provide a fortified plant-milk (non-dairy) alternative. This means that vegan schoolchildren are not consistently provided for in the same way that non-vegan schoolchildren are, and as a result, they are at risk of missing out on valuable nutrients. According to testimonies from vegan families, some children are unable to access plant milk at school.

The number of vegans in the UK has quadrupled over the 4 years prior to 2018, with the number estimated to be around 600,000 and rising. In the UK, 17% of consumers report dairy avoidance in their household. This means that there are many vegan schoolchildren who are currently being discriminated against by schools not providing an adequate plant-based alternative to milk for them.

You will no doubt be aware of the importance of the European Union wide principle of non-discrimination and related initiatives implemented throughout the UK to promote equality, diversity and inclusion. In the context of this high value placed on plurality, it is vital to ensure that all children feel accepted in their school environment. Differences should be celebrated rather than penalised. Promoting equality in schools fosters good relationships in communities, teaches valuable skills with regards to acceptance of diversity and reduces the chance of bullying. Furthermore, treating young people equally aids individual well-being and prevents those with different characteristics from feeling isolated and excluded.

Fortified plant milks are a sustainable choice, requiring far less land and water than dairy milk, whilst also generating fewer greenhouse gas emissions. Oat milk for example requires less than 10 times the amount of land, 9 times the amount of water and produces on average 3 times less greenhouse gas emissions than cow's milk (*Reducing food's environmental impacts through producers and consumers* - Poore & Nemecek - 2018 - University of Oxford). If we are going to meaningfully tackle the climate emergency, we cannot afford to ignore the environmental benefits that fortified plant milks offer, whilst not compromising on our nutrition.

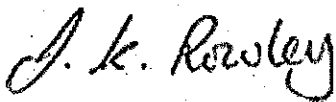
It is important for everyone, especially children, to eat calcium rich foods daily and fortified plant milk plays an important role in vegan nutrition. In fact, the UK's Eatwell Guide recognises that fortified plant milk represents a valuable alternative to cow's milk. Calcium content is comparable, and the soya variety is similar to cow's milk in terms of protein content and quality. In addition, the British Dietetic Association and the American Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics acknowledge that well-planned vegan diets can support healthy living during all stages of life.

We note that the School Food Standards do allow for selected fortified plant milks to be offered under the Healthier drinks section, however, as schools are not mandated to provide all drinks from this section, these drinks may not be offered in schools at all, to the detriment of vegan pupils as highlighted earlier.

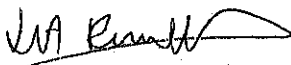
The School Food Standards could easily be made far more inclusive by adding fortified plant milks into the mandatory daily milk section. This would help to ensure that vegan children, as well as those who don't drink milk for other reasons, have access to the nutrition they need to thrive.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts on the issues outlined above and the importance of incorporating mandatory fortified plant milk provisions into the School Food Standards. We would be happy to meet and discuss this further with you, if required.

Yours sincerely



Jeanette Rowley
Legal Advisor
The Vegan Society



Heather Russell
Dietitian
The Vegan Society